

Revising the Two-Major Theater War Standard

by Hans Binnendijk and Richard L. Kugler

Key Points

Preparing to fight two nearly simultaneous major theater wars (MTWs) has been the standard used to design U.S. defense policy and force structure since 1993. But with a broader spectrum of challenges looming, the threat of concurrent wars in the Persian Gulf and on the Korean Peninsula appearing less likely, and the emergence of China as a potential rival, a new approach is needed. Without a new standard, the Armed Forces will transform themselves using a rigid and outdated strategic model.

The standard put forth herein combines attention to peacetime needs with a fresh interpretation of wartime requirements. For peacetime, it would create force packages for regional commanders to perform deterrent, theater engagement, routine operational, and minor crisis management missions. In wartime, it would create a powerful joint force for handling one conflict which may be larger than a MTW, plus forces for two medium-sized operations elsewhere. This amounts to a new strategic calculus of *one plus one-half plus one-half contingencies* to determine U.S. force requirements.

This new standard aims to make defense plans not only responsive to real-world events, but also flexible and adaptable. It judges that preparing U.S. forces to handle a wide spectrum of events—big and small, in peace and war—may be more important than optimizing them for one canonical wartime scenario. It calls for a force structure that is large and adaptable enough to maintain core military capabilities in order to perform diverse strategic missions.

One of the toughest challenges facing the Department of Defense (DOD) is translating strategic policy into concrete guidelines for preparing U.S. military forces. A defense planning standard is a set of judgments and directives for performing this key function. Normally this standard has three associated roles: to determine the size of forces and their main missions; to establish program and budgetary priorities; and to inform the Congress and the public of the rationale behind the defense strategy and force posture. For example, the Kennedy administration standard was a *two and one-half war strategy*, and the Nixon administration had a *one and one-half war strategy*. To guide its planning, the Carter administration used the standard of multi-theater war with the Soviet Union in Europe and the Persian Gulf. The Reagan administration applied an Illustrative Planning Scenario that contemplated global war with the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact.

When the Cold War ended, it swept away the Soviet threat and the old bipolar order, leaving a number of turbulent regions in its wake. The Bush administration responded with a Base Force that created general capabilities without regard to specific scenarios, though it did hedge against a Soviet resurgence. The Clinton administration, in its Bottom-Up Review of early 1993, crafted a standard which called upon U.S. forces to be constantly ready to fight two major regional conflicts (MRCs) in widely separated theaters and overlapping time frames. This approach reflected an effort to balance military requirements with budgetary constraints, and to link U.S. force levels to credible foreign threats in direct ways. The

1997 Quadrennial Defense Review confirmed this standard (changing the terminology from MRCs to MTWs or major theater wars) and noted that forces would also be called upon to deal with smaller-scale contingencies (SSCs). In the years since its adoption, the two-MTW standard has had a profound impact on how the Department of Defense has carried out business. It has affected not only force levels and the activities of the unified commanders in chief (CINCs), but also manpower policies, readiness standards, improvement efforts, program priorities, and budgeting.

The Two-MTW Standard

The many positive features of the two-MTW standard have helped it endure for the last 8 years. At the time it was created, both Iraq and North Korea had large conventional forces and bellicose intentions toward their weaker neighbors. By committing major forces to defend against these threats, the two-MTW standard signaled the seriousness of U.S. strategic intentions, warned adversaries, and reassured allies in the Persian Gulf and Northeast Asia. Moreover, it helped ensure that a decisive U.S. military response in one theater would not open the door to aggression in another. The deterrent effect of the strategy had a salutary effect as the 1990s wore on. While U.S. forces never fully met the goals of the two-MTW standard, they came close enough to ensure that if war had broken out, the United States ultimately would have prevailed.

The two-MTW standard also had a positive effect on the U.S. policy process. It set limits on post-Cold War reductions, while creating a credible rationale for today's posture of 13 active Army and Marine divisions, 20 Air Force

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active and Reserve fighter wings, and 12 Navy carrier battle groups (CVBGs). In calling for a rapid capacity to project large forces overseas, it mandated high readiness rates for all active forces and selected Reserve component units. It created incentives for improvements in such key areas as mobility, logistic support, modern munitions, and war reserve stocks. It encouraged the services to pursue joint operations, information-age innovations, force transformation, and new doctrines. It directed that U.S. forces must have the capacity to act unilaterally, but it also called for multilateral cooperation and improved interoperability with allied forces. While allocating virtually the entire combat posture to two MTW contingencies, it left room for some forces to be used for other purposes—for example, either small crises or peacekeeping operations—when global conditions made such diversions safe.

Drawbacks

Recent trends suggest that the two-MTW standard is significantly less credible than it was 8 years ago. A key reason is diminishing concern that MTWs against Iraq and North Korea might erupt at the same time. Although Iraq and North Korea are unpredictable and dangerous, they present less serious conventional military threats than they did a decade ago. Iraq's military has never recovered from Operation *Desert Storm*; its defense budget is estimated to be about 20 percent of the pre-*Desert Storm* level; and Operations *Northern Watch* and *Southern Watch* have helped to contain Saddam. If sanctions unravel, however, Iraqi military spending could increase again.

The North Korean military remains large and forward deployed, but South Korean military modernization efforts have created a more stable balance on the peninsula. While Seoul remains vulnerable because of its location, there is little doubt that U.S. and Republic of Korea (ROK) forces would prevail in any conflict. North Korea is impoverished and seeks international support to avoid its own political collapse. North-South reconciliation, while slowed somewhat, remains on track.

Sooner or later, both of these political confrontations may mutate to the point where neither is capable of producing an MTW, much less two MTWs at once. Should either Iraq or North Korea attack U.S. or allied forces, the result would be sure defeat for the attacking forces, so there is little incentive for either rogue state to try to take advantage of conflict elsewhere. Other threats may take their place, and MTW conflicts will remain a factor in the strategic calculus. But the notion that two MTWs will still be the main danger to world

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peace seems increasingly a stretch. As in the past, MTWs likely will occur one at a time, not in bunches. If the United States were engaged in one major theater war, its current posture would provide sizable precision strike assets and strong allies to deter a second adversary from taking advantage.

As the risk of nearly simultaneous wars with Iraq and North Korea wanes, a broader spectrum of threats is emerging. China is a growing military power in Asia, and a new standard must take into account the possibility of an unwanted but large conflict over Taiwan. As the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) accelerates, smaller powers may feel emboldened to risk confrontation with the United States. The recent Kosovo conflict was a medium-sized war, and it was fought in Europe—a theater ignored by the two-MTW standard. It is increasingly clear that U.S. forces must operate actively in at least three theaters, not two. Elsewhere, failing states in several regions continue to be ravaged by ethnic or religious conflict that may necessitate the use of U.S. and allied forces. The spectrum of military conflict is steadily widening and expanding to new geographical locations, creating the potential for wars that are greater than MTWs, less

than them, and above all, radically different in conduct from them.

Recent years also have brought major changes to U.S. national security strategy that further erode the appeal and staying power of the two-MTW standard. Such concepts as peacetime strategic shaping, homeland defense, theater engagement, alliance enlargement, peace operations, counterproliferation, counternarcotics operations, asymmetric warfare, and ballistic missile defense have become key parts of the modern strategic lexicon. None of them finds a home in the two-MTW standard. This problem seems destined to worsen in the coming years. The two-MTW standard is anchored in the premise of U.S. forces carrying out traditional border defense commitments to allies against classical invasion threats. The future norm may be quite different from this model, involving a mix of power projection missions, expeditionary strike operations, informal coalitions of the willing, and security assurances in the face of WMD proliferation.

An additional drawback is that the two-MTW standard has started eroding the strategic flexibility and responsiveness of the U.S. military. Faced with the overwhelming need to prepare to win two theater wars nearly simultaneously, most of America's military assets are tied to that mission. For example, one MTW might require 6–7 ground divisions, 7–11 air wings, and 3–6 carriers. At the same time, there is high day-to-day demand for other skills that are in low supply. The result is a high operations tempo for units not dedicated primarily to fighting a major conflict while warfighting units are underutilized. The U.S. military is caught between competing priorities, lacking flexible assets for unexpected operations, and hard-pressed to handle the transition from peace to war. Having insurance against the improbable event of two MTWs makes sense, but not at the expense of insufficient forces for other missions that are already occurring. Setting a new standard may help reverse these imbalances and remove the rigidity.

The rigidity of current defense planning especially affects U.S. European Command (EUCOM), which lacks any officially sanctioned contingency to assess its force needs. As a result, it must meet U.S. military commitments to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) with forces that are assigned to other theaters in wartime—even though 109,000 troops are stationed in Europe in peacetime. The effect is to leave EUCOM requesting forces every time a

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contingency arises in its area of responsibility. U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM) benefits from large wartime allocations, but because its forces are earmarked for defense of South Korea, they are not readily available for other security missions in East Asia and Southeast Asia. While U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) can call on large forces for defending the Persian Gulf, few forces are available for crisis missions elsewhere in its area. Overall, current U.S. defense plans blanket Northeast Asia and the Persian Gulf with large forces, but leave the rest of the huge southern belt—the endangered zone stretching from the Balkans to the Asian crescent—uncovered in the absence of special decisions to divert forces for this purpose.

As the Kosovo conflict showed, U.S. forces can be diverted from MTW plans in extremis, but only temporarily. Fixation on MTWs can result in failure to create the operational plans needed swiftly to deploy forces for such missions. It also can result in neglect of programs and capabilities that might be uniquely critical for such conflicts. A posture optimized to send large forces to the Persian Gulf and Korea might not be well suited to fight a larger war in other places. To be sure, the growing plethora of new-era missions creates the risk that U.S. forces will be overstretched and diverted from their central defense priorities. But there is an equal risk that if defense planning remains locked in the comfortable past, it will neglect the need for flexibility in a changing world, the imperatives of new missions, and the dangers posed by new threats.

A New Standard

Tomorrow's dangers range from the prospect of fighting a larger foe to managing the chaos that exists in the vast regions outside the democratic community. In this fluid setting, major regional actors like Russia, China, and Iran will seek to dominate security affairs in their part of the world. Some medium-sized powers will continue to act like rogues, willing to challenge the status quo through WMD proliferation and aggression. Failing states and ethnic violence will continue coupled with such transnational threats as terrorism, drug trafficking, and other types of organized crime. The dangers ahead will arise in the near to mid-term, not just in the distant future.

In determining how to deal with this global milieu, a new defense planning standard must be strongly connected to national security strategy, not separate from it. While the Bush administration strategy is not yet clear, it likely will embody a combination of enhanced homeland defense, reinvigorated alliances, resolve toward adversaries, selective military commitments, and decisive force operations in event of war. In order to support this agenda, a new planning standard cannot be narrowly military, but also must make political and strategic sense. It must articulate a theory of

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force needs for peacetime and wartime, so that the U.S. military is instructed on how to deal with both settings and how to make the difficult transition from the former to the latter. The peacetime component must provide guidance on the forces and other assets needed to pursue such goals as reforming alliances, creating new partnerships, fostering regional stability, deterring aggression, and resolving crises. The wartime component must provide equally clear guidance on how U.S. forces are to be organized, allocated, and employed in combat, including situations demanding simultaneous force operations.

Peacetime missions are important because they occupy most of the military's attention, consume large funds, and provide the setting in which key CINCs must prepare for war. Gauging force needs for them is more complicated than meets the eye, and likely will necessitate calculations different from those of the 1990s. Clearly a strong defense posture can help preserve peace and underwrite U.S. foreign policy in many places. But being powerful in the abstract is not enough for a global superpower facing difficult challenges in multiple regions. The forces and activities employed in each region must be carefully tailored to ensure that they produce the desired strategic consequences. If the coming decade mandates change in the U.S. overseas presence and engagement patterns, the new planning standard should point the way.

The best way to assess normal peacetime needs is to examine the strategic agendas and priorities of the three key overseas commands: EUCOM, PACOM, and CENTCOM. An appropriate sizing standard is to equip the key regional commanders with a force package that would allow them to perform their deterrent, theater engagement, routine operational, and minor crisis management missions. Each package would consist of a combination of overseas-deployed forces augmented by some home-based units that are assigned to these commands and are readily available to them when the need arises. To meet these four peacetime missions, each command's package might include up to 100,000 troops, with contributions from all three services. Remaining forces stationed primarily in the continental United States (CONUS) would be held as a large, flexible strategic reserve for use by the regional CINCs. Additional equipment pre-positioning would be required to assure rapid deployments to more diverse regions.

As a replacement for the two-MTW construct, the wartime standard put forth here is a three-package posture for one plus one-half plus one-half contingencies. The *one* force would be composed of sufficient combat formations to wage not only a standard MTW, but also a somewhat bigger larger theater war (LTW) against a coalition of adversaries or a big power (for example, China). This force would require joint assets, including ground, air, and naval forces for both close combat and long-range fires. The exact composition of this force, however, would not be fixed in concrete. Instead, its makeup could be varied by drawing selectively upon the overall force posture, thereby gaining the capacity to fight a wide spectrum of LTW conflicts, depending upon the region and enemy forces. The first *one-half* force would be a high-technology, medium-sized posture for expeditionary and strike missions, endowed with ample long-range strike capability. Oriented to waging a small theater war (STW), it would be capable of Kosovo-like operations, counter-WMD strike missions, reinforcement of allies, and halting or delaying major aggression. The second *one-half* force would also be capable of traditional combat operations, but it would be tailored for operations in mountainous terrain and urban areas, special operations, low-intensity combat, and peace operations. It would have an overall capacity for a STW, but its assets could be parceled out among multiple smaller missions.

These three different wartime force packages would provide considerable strategic flexibility for dealing with all three key theaters at once. They would provide the core military capabilities needed for new strategic missions and for commitments to U.S. allies. They would require a force structure roughly comparable to today's, with modifications for the new missions. They would allow the U.S. military to wage a large war, while still having significant forces for limited contingencies in the other two theaters. These force packages would be flexible constructs, not rigid organizations. They would allow for maximum reorganization of the services to meet new challenges. They would create a framework for drawing selectively from the overall posture, whose diverse portfolio of assets could be combined

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and recombined as the situation warrants. Together, the combination of peacetime packages assigned to the regional CINCs and these three CONUS-based wartime packages would provide a better capacity to make the transition from peace to war, and to tailor responses to individual or multiple events.

How might these three packages be employed in a setting requiring use of all of them? Illustratively, the LTW force might be used to wage a large war in the Persian Gulf, the high-technology strike force might be used in Asia to help halt a North Korean attack, and the low-intensity force might be used for peacekeeping on Europe's periphery. Alternatively, the LTW force might be used in an Asian confrontation with China, the strike force might be used to suppress WMD threats in the Persian Gulf, and the low-intensity force might support United Nations operations in Africa. The key point is that this one plus one-half plus one half posture would provide three different, valuable strategic assets, plus considerable agility and versatility. It would permit U.S. forces to handle a wider range of challenges than a posture organized rigidly into two large MTW packages,

Table 1. Two-Major Theater War Standard: Wartime Allocations (Illustrative)

	First MTW	Second MTW	Reserve
Army/Marine Divisions	7	6	9
Air Force Fighter Wings	11	9	—
Navy Carrier Battle Groups	5	5	2

Table 2. New Standard: Peacetime and Wartime Allocations (Illustrative)

Assigned in Peacetime

	EUCOM	PACOM	CENTCOM
Force Level	100,000	100,000	40,000

Assigned in Wartime

	LTW	High-technology STW	Low-intensity STW	Reserve
Army/Marine Divisions	9	1	3	9
Air Force Fighter Wings	12	5	3	—
Navy Carrier Battle Groups	6	3	1	2

each of them tailored for a similar type of war. In the event of two MTW conflicts, these three packages could be combined to comprise two packages, one for each conflict. Thus a great deal of the deterrent power offered by the two-MTW standard would be retained.

The DOD planning standard for the coming years is an issue that warrants careful thought, not only because the Bush administration may want change, but also because the two-MTW standard has run out of gas. The new standard put forth here does not necessarily increase or shrink the size of U.S. military forces. Nor is it a panacea. Rather, it provides a model and stimulus for change. It does make U.S. defense strategy more credible by focusing on emerging security missions. Implemented properly, it would make forces more effective by

broadening their response options in peace and war. Provided the defense budget is adequate and priorities are set wisely, this standard will help strengthen the ability of U.S. forces to keep the peace and win our country's wars.

The new force packages envisioned in this standard will provide greater flexibility and adaptability—characteristics that will be vital even for a military posture that remains the world's best. Future U.S. forces will need to react to an ever-shifting array of missions, operations, crises, and wars. They may also need to adapt gracefully to periodic shifts in U.S. strategy and policy in a world where dynamic change, rather than continuity, marks the early 21st century.

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